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ABSTRACT

A study of Texas high school students who are native speakers of Spanish with high levels of language ability was undertaken on the assumptions that (1) a large number existed, (2) bilingual schooling may have increased the prevalence of these individuals, and (3) from academic and professional points of view, these abilities might be used more effectively for the benefit of the students and society. Tests and surveys in 1977 and 1985 indicate that a number of students who had never taken Spanish courses in school had advanced Spanish language skills, suggesting that tests of language students might not be the most effective means of finding individuals with advanced skills. It is recommended that students with highly developed Spanish language abilities be identified in high school by testing all students with any Spanish skills with a brief standardized vocabulary test. Universities should be encouraged to recruit these students and develop their language skills, possibly by offering college credit for advanced Spanish courses taken before college entrance. Their objective should be developing this largely wasted intellectual resource. (MSE)

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SPANISH LANGUAGE RESOURCES IN TEXAS: CASE STUDIES OF 1985 HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES WITH ACADEMICALLY AND PROFESSIONALLY SIGNIFICANT READING ABILITIES IN SPANISH

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SPANISH LANGUAGE RESOURCES IN TEXAS: CASE STUDIES OF 1985 HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES WITH ACADEMICALLY AND PROFESSIONALLY SIGNIFICANT READING ABILITIES IN SPANISH

The most common assumption which seems to be made by the media, the public, school teachers, university faculty, linguists, parents, and almost everyone else concerned in any way with the Spanish-speaking population of the United States is that they speak neither English nor Spanish well, and so the last we might might expect from them is the ability to read serious literature, much less write it.

One major factor in the creation of this impression has been the multitude of newspaper and magazine articles, theses, and other academic papers which have been written on the non-standard characteristics of the language of Spanish-speaking people in the United States. A substantial bibliography was compiled on this subject by Teschner, Bills, and Craddock (1975), and since then papers, articles, and books have been repeating and refining what the materials in this bibliography indicated. However, almost everything in almost all of these materials is misleading, for two principal reasons: 1. most of the "non-standard" characteristics of the spoken language described are found in Spanish in every part of the world in which that language is used, and 2. formal learning in any modern society depends almost entirely on the ability to <u>read</u>, and very little on the ability to speak a "standard" dialect.

There is evidence of the existence of hundreds and perhaps thousands of Spanish-speaking Texans who presently have the ability to take claim of the heritage bequeathed them by those who have made and are making of the language one of the finest instruments in existence for the perception of what it means to be human. These young people have the background and the potential to invest this heritage with their own perspectives and experiences, and to utilize it to supplement, perhaps to challenge, and in the long run, even to surpass, some of the best contemporary writers in the Spanish language. They will not do it, however, by ignoring the literary fortune which, by virtue of being born to one or two parents who speak Spanish at home, is their heritage.

They must receive this heritage before they can do anything with it, and therein lies the rub. The government of the United States keeps it from them, as does the government of Texas, the schools, even the programs which are called "bilingual," where Spanish occasionally is used. Also, there are many Spanish surnamed political militants who refuse to see any relation between their own culture and what is written in books read by Spanish-speaking people in twenty-two other countries. It is not as though there were an active campaign against the development of the Spanish language resources of Texas; it is that the concepts of the use of Texas Spanish are about as well developed as were the concepts of the use of Texas petroleum in the nineteenth century.

This waste of Spanish resources is a phenomenon I have observed for more than twenty-five years. In 1958 I began teaching economics, business law, and world geography in a high school where some fifty percent of the students were native speakers of Spanish, but very few were in my classes. Highly impressed by the abilities the native speakers demonstrated in personal conversation with me, I asked the principal to allow me to teach them Spanish, but using textbooks written for Mexican secondary school students rather than those designed for native speakers of English.

The students did so well--and the authorities at the local college were so reluctant to recognize officially their abilities--that I began using the college literary anthologies and insisting that my students be tested and given appropriate college credit for their knowledge and skills. Some of them wanted material at a still higher level, so we went to the original and unabridged El Ingenioso Hidalgo don Quijote de la Mancha. They convinced me--in part by writing papers in Spanish of an average of more than one hundred pages on the Quijote--that the study of that work was far more important to them than Shakespeare would be in a class of English-speaking students.

While the principal body of contemporary literature in Spanish which has made such an impact in the literary world as well as on the reading population was not yet written at that time, it seemed to me that my students were better prepared for the serious study of classical Hispanic literature than were English-speaking students to begin the study of classical literature in English. My experience during the next four years convinced me that the best of them were much better prepared than the best students in English. During the past twenty-five years this conclusion has been confirmed in my own experience so many times in so many ways that any attempt at "proof" would seem a waste of time.

It was only because I had known so few people during that time who had any awareness at all of the potential of native speakers of Spanish for advanced study of the language and literature that in 1985 I proposed a modest study of "Language Resources in Texas" to consist of formal tests of the reading abilities in Spanish of recent high school graduates who had been in bilingual programs, and of case studies of those with the highest levels of ability for the purpose of determining the factors which contribute to the development of those skills. One assumption was that bilingual schooling might be a major factor.

The purpose of the research was to conduct case studies of 1985 high school graduates with academically and/or professionally significant reading abilities in Spanish in order to discover some of the factors in the development of their skills as well as the possibilities for their further development. The research was undertaken on the assumption that 1) there are undiscovered high levels of Spanish abilities among high school students in Texas and 2) bilingual schooling may have increased the prevalence of these abilities, and 3) from the academic and professional points of view, these abilities might be utilized much more effectively for the benefit of the students and their society than has heretofore been the case.

With respect to the latter, I proposed to begin an analysis of the potential of native speakers of Spanish for careers in the Liberal Arts, especially where use might be made of their skills in Spanish. This could include, but would not be restricted to, specialization in language and/or literature; it is based on the assumption that language gives uniquely valuable insights in relation to any other type of study of human beings.

It is difficult to get any index of the potential of Texas Spanish because, as stated previously, neither the young people who speak it, their parents, their teachers, the state or federal governments, or anyone else has any idea of the level of their abilities, much less its significance.

One of a number of indications of this level is given by the fact that on the 1985 National Spanish Examination administered by the National Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese, fourteen of the twenty-eight highest-scoring students in the nation with home experience were students from Texas with Spanish surnames. (Hispania, 68, 3, Fall 1985, p. 578). Other states offered little competition: eight winning students were from California, one was from New Jersey, one from Wisconsin, one from Oklahoma, one from New Mexico, one from Florida, and one from Pennsylvania. If these were football results, they would be broadcast all over the nation. And Texas would be second to none as a center for recruitment of players. But newspapers and magazines nowhere speak of the highly developed abilities of Texas youth in using Spanish; more newsworthy is their assumed linguistic limitations as suggested by the term "Tex-Mex." Implicitly, it seems to be assumed that there is little if any reason for pride in ability to use a foreign language well, although there are reasons for a never-ending commentary on its non-standard use.

Even these tests fail to discover the abundance of resources which exist in Texas, because they test only those who are studying Spanish in school, and the students with the highest levels of ability in the language often never take a course in Spanish.

This was indicated by the results of tests I administered in the summer of 1985 to twenty-one Spanish surname students in five Texas school districts. All but one had attended elementary school in Texas. On a test devised by the Modern Language Association to determine college levels of Spanish reading ability, only two of the five highest-scoring recent high school graduates had ever taken a high school course in Spanish; all of the five lowest-scoring students and seven of the eleven middle-scoring students had taken high school Spanish. The average score for students who had taken no high school Spanish was 22.5% higher than for those who had.

The reason for this is very simple: most people do not want to study what they already know, and in almost every class Spanish in Texas is taught as if the student knew little or nothing of the language. So those with the highest levels of ability tend to stay out of Spanish classes. Thus not only is the society deprived of the potential benefits of the highest levels of Spanish usage attainable, but almost all those who are most capable of receiving the heritage which should, together with their native language, be their birthright, are denied even the knowledge that such a heritage exists.

This was by no means a random sample, but in one high school in Laredo, Texas where it was possible to administer a questionnaire to almost all (203 of 238) students, 46% (70 of 152) of the Spanish surname students said that they could read Spanish as well as or better than they could read English; 37 had two years of high school Spanish, 21 had one year, and 12 had none. All 152 Spanish surname students said that they could read Spanish, but their comparative level of abilities remains unknown.

Of the 51 non-Spanish surname students, only three said they could read Spanish as well as they could read English, and eight said they could not read it at all. Except in a few rare instances, it may be predicted with a high degree of certainty that the reading abilities in Spanish of the Spanish surname students will go to waste insofar as any benefit to the society is concerned, because they will never be recognized.

While the focus of the research is on individual cases rather than the group as a whole, certain group statistics seem important enough to cite in relation to groups of students studying college Spanish. For example, on the Modern Language Association test the average for the entire group was above that of students in fourth semester Spanish who took the same test in 1977 at Texas A&M University; the average for 127 students at TAMU was 30.8 items correct of a total of 50; for the 21 recent high school graduates it was 33.4. Even more significant is that the average of the ten highest scores among the latter group was 42.5, above the reading level in Spanish of most students in their fourth year of college study of the language.

On the aforementioned test in 1977, the highest score in the class was 45; it was made by a native speaker majoring in Spanish, who is now an executive in the foreign service department of InterFirst Bank in Houston. Four of the high school graduates had scores of 45, 45, 46, and 48. The subject with 48 had her elementary education in Mexico; the one who made 46 had no bilingual training, but had two high school Spanish courses; those who made 45 were in bilingual programs from grades 4 through 6, but had no high school Spanish.

Three of the twenty-six TAMU students and seven of the twenty-one subjects tested had a score higher than 40; one was a 15-year-old sophomore, Sandra Martínez, who at first was assumed to be a senior because on a questionnaire she stated she had attended the Laredo Public Schools for twelve years; however, she had included Head Start and kindergarten. Her example taught me that my principal error in conducting this research was in testing students who were graduating from high school; outstanding Spanish students should be identified earlier to give them to opportunity to better prepare to take advantage of their abilities.

Relatively speaking, Sandra's scores were even more impressive on the Inter-American tests, which utilize more technical and scientific and less literary vocabulary than the MLA tests. She made a higher score on reading comprehension than did any of the recent high school graduates tested.

In January 1986 I used the test with fourth and sixth semester college classes; she made a higher score than any of the students in the fourth semester class, and the only two students who made higher scores than she did in the sixth semester class were one who had attended primary and secondary school in Puerto Rico, and another who had attended primary school in Venezuela and secondary school in Hawaii and Switzerland. Others who made lower scores included four students who are native speakers of Spanish and who attended school in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Mexico.

Sandra had attended the Head Start program in Laredo, and had heard classes taught in Spanish from kindergarten through tenth grade. Her mother is a strong supporter of the bilingual program; she now has a granddaughter in the program whom the school authorities had attempted to move to the conventional program because of the child's high level of ability in English, but her grandmother insisted that she remain in order to learn more Spanish. Sandra says that the easiest subject for her in school has been English.

This and other evidence shows clearly that Spanish language reading abilities equal or superior to those required for college graduation are attained by high school students in a variety of ways. But they rarely are discovered even by the students themselves, who usually know little either of the level or the significance of their own abilities.

Four of the subjects tested (including Sandra) scored in the 99th percentile of high school seniors (principally native speakers of Spanish) in the United States who have taken the Inter-American reading tests, including Pedro Limón from Laredo, Guillermina de Montalvo from El Paso, and Francisco Rodríguez from El Paso. I do not have the score on this test for one other student from Laredo, Elvira Galván, but her scores on other tests indicate that she also has an exceptionally high level of reading ability. She had a score of 46 on the MLA reading test, and a perfect score on the MLA writing test. I will administer the Inter-American reading comprehension test to her before terminating the project.

None of these students were identified by the aforementioned National Spanish Examinations of the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese, and my study identified perhaps less than one percent of high school students in Texas with a level of reading ability in Spanish comparable to that of most students who receive college degrees in the language. There is probably no other waste of intellectual resources in the United States comparable to this.

I have a solution to propose. Universities in Texas could identify students with highly developed abilities in Spanish, especially in reading, and invite them to take advanced Spanish courses in the summer preceding their senior year in high school for college credit. Not only that, they could give appropriate credit for demonstrated abilities in the language, so that the student would have a head start in college due to the development of these skills.

The Inter-American test series, developed and standardized in the United States, Puerto Rico, and Mexico, utilizes one ten-minute vocabulary test. It could be administered to all high school students with any knowledge of Spanish. It is accurate enough to give some indication of which of these students should be administered reading comprehension tests.

In the present case, for example, those who scored above the ninetieth percentile on the vocabulary test were Pedro Limón (99th), Guillermina de Montalvo (99th), Francisco Rodríguez (99th), Barbara Heredia of Colorado City, Texas (95th), and Sandra Martínez (92nd). This included all students with the highest reading comprehension scores, and one whose ranking on the latter was relatively lower. It failed to identify, however, two of the students from El Paso, Concepción Olvera and Leonor Flores, among those scoring highest on the MLA tests. This seems to indicate a limitation of the Inter-American tests with respect to the measurement of the ability to read the type of literature studied by Spanish language majors. We may also note that neither of these two students had any high school Spanish at all. The use of tests such as these would not, therefore, be a perfect solution to the utilization of the Spanish language resources of Texas, but they, together with appropriate counseling, curriculum changes, university recruitment programs, and financial assistance, could be a first step toward making Texas not only the bilingual center of the nation, but a major center for humanistic studies as well.

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